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ABSTRACT

Oral interpretation utilizes the self-referencing qualities of language and literature which involves the interpreter as both actor and reader. By "self-referencing" is meant the capacity language has to express not only literal meaning but also, at the same time, the process of realization and of attitudinizing toward this meaning. Self-reference enable language to express more than one meaning and even contradictory meanings using the same word symbols. Literature, self-referentially, draws life from the dual tension between being ourselves and becoming someone else. The interpreter may use language self-referentially by altering denotative meaning by tonal connotation. He uses literature self-referentially through his unique self's identifying with the persona he portrays dramatically. The oral interpretation performance also provides a third self-reference, existence in an art experience and as a part of the audience at the same time. Two implications which may be drawn from this concept of self-reference for interpretation performance are (1) that the actor/reader dichotomy is dependent on the unique self-reference of the interpreter and (2) that the added dimension of empathy (intellectual detachment) is made possible by self-reference. (HOD)

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Oral Interpretation Performance as

A Self-Referencing Process

by

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Whether the oral interpreter is an actor or reader has been an issue of long standing within the interpretation field. The controversy, which began in 1916 with Maud May Babcock's "Interpretive Presentation Versus Impersonative Presentation,"[1] is to the present time not resolved. It may never be but its exploration is worthy of attention as it casts light on the interpretative art.

Several leaders in the field of interpretation have attempted to clarify the actor-reader distinction in their textbooks. Charlotte Lee describes the differences as "not of degree, but of kind."[2] In performance the actor attempts physical explicitness, while the interpreter relies upon suggestion.[3] Wallace Bacon maintains that the actor portrays a single character, living the lines, seemingly unaware of the audience.[4] Portraying many characters, basing his suggestion on a knowledge of the material and a selection of physical and vocal characteristics, the interpreter becomes "the instrument"[5] that allows the audience to see and hear the work through him.[6] The interpreter becomes "in some sense himself and yet not himself."[7]

The dual character of the interpreter--being the same as and different from the persona of his material--is unique among the performing arts. The actor becomes the character; the dancer becomes the dance; the musician

becomes the music. The interpreter alone is both himself and persona during his performance. This paper will analyze this paradoxical aspect of the interpreter's art from the perspective of J. Bronowski's concept of "self-reference" as it is presented in The Identity of Man[8] and "The Logic of the Mind."[9] The well worn arguments regarding the actor/reader dilemma may have missed the fundamental point: an interpreter must be both actor and reader simultaneously. Adherence to this perspective of the oral interpreter's art suggests new attitudes towards his problems in assuming the persona of his material and his relationship to his audience.

By "self-reference," Bronowski means "that language may not only be used to describe parts of the world but also the parts of the language itself."[10] In other words, language has the capacity to express not only literal meaning, but also, at the same time, to express the process of realization and of attitudinizing towards this meaning. We not only state the information we "know" in language, but we also imply how we came to that "knowledge" and our attitude towards it. Because the language of literature permits us to see into another character and our own person at the same time, we identify the character with ourselves and become consubstantial with it.

Because oral interpretation is the performance of literature, it also is a self-referencing process. To explore this aspect of the nature of oral interpretation, three topics will be examined:

1. The self-referential quality of language
2. The self-referential quality of literature
3. The self-referential quality of interpretation performance

Self-reference enables language to express more than one meaning and even contradictory meanings using the same word symbols. For example, Epimenides the Cretan states that all Cretans are liars, but because the dictum may also refer to itself, Epimenides implies that the statement itself is a lie because it is made by a Cretan. And so if the statement is true, it lies; and if it lies, it is true. In this way, language may have the quality of an optical illusion, allowing a double perception.

Psychological and philosophical studies involve self-referencing as they encounter men thinking and acting about men thinking and acting. How could Descartes say "I think therefore I am" if he had not been thinking? How could Freud conclude that the neighbor on the right is polite because he has an inferiority complex and the neighbor on the left is rude because he has an inferiority complex and still be correct about the nature of the inferiority complex? Precisely because both statements taken together imply that Freud's awareness of those reactions might suggest that he himself had an inferiority complex.[12] It is ironic that we still have only man's mind and man's life as primary instruments for the study of man's mind and life.

Literature expresses its multiple meanings by drawing us into the fictive situation through identification. For example, in this anonymous 18th century epigram engraved on the collar of a royal dog:

> I am his Majesty's dog at Kew,
> God prays you sir, whose dog are you?13

Several levels of humor resonate within these two lines. It is amusing that a human should make a dog collar that would be read by another human, all three (dog owner, dog, and sender of dog tag) of which might be con-

sidered "someone's dog" in some sense. The lines draw the reader directly into the ironic situation of the royal dog by the recognition that the reader also belongs to others.

When discerning in what senses a word, character, or situation may be understood, we naturally refer not only to the outer world, but also to our personal feelings and perspectives, our inner world. By identification, we become Emma Bovary dreaming and King Lear despairing. Literature compels us to view the world (and ourselves) through itself. At the same time, its perspective forces us to look into the mind of the author. Literature expresses one man's conception of the world.[14] As such, it only becomes significant when literature consubstantiates the reader's conception of the world and universally man's conception of his world.

J. Bronowski, in The Identity of Man, discusses the value of this literary identification:

> I hold that each man has a self, and enlarges his self by his experiences. That is, he learns from experience; from the experience of others as well as his own, and from their inner experience as well as their outer. But he can learn from their inner experience only by entering it, and that is not done merely by reading a written record of it. We must have the gift to identify ourselves with the other men, to relive their experience and to feel its conflicts as our own.15

Literature, then, self-referentially draws life from the dual tension between being ourselves and becoming someone else. This double perception allows us to see ourselves in the persona, to observe not only his behavior but to understand his feelings as if they were our own.

The oral interpretation performance utilizes the self-referencing qualities of language and literature. The unique self-referential quality of oral interpretation performance is that the interpreter exists simultaneously as a fictive persona in literature and as himself. He must both

"suggest" and "be." He is both the art experience and a reminder of reality. While the setting of an actor's characterization encourages an identification between the actor's attitudes and those of the depicted persona, the usual environment of an oral interpretation performance discourages identification between attitudes of the interpretation and the persona.[16] The interpreter usually performs in a large room rather than on a stage; usually the lights are on. On his podium, if the interpreter has the use of a podium, there may be a lectern and a glass of water, but these are for him and not for his King Lear or Emma Bovary. As to costuming, if his selections are mournful, he will wear his black suit; if they are merely sober, he may wear his navy. Furthermore, if he reads a play, he will take all the parts himself and not even the most fantastic imagination in the audience will fail to recognize that he cannot be everybody at once. However, it is a mistake to conclude from the actual physical circumstances that the interpreter cannot or does not try to reproduce to a high degree the tone or attitude of the persona within a piece of literature. Using his voice and body, the interpreter presents the essence of the experience found in the literature. The voice expresses outwardly what is felt inside the persona.[17] The interpreter may use his voice to express attitudes of anger, yearning, or fear, causing the audience to generate similar feelings.

The interpreter may use his body to present more fully the literary experience. Don Geiger refers to the "behavioral synecdoches" of the interpreter by saying "that the interpreter often suggests a pattern of behavior expressive of a certain attitude by the projection of some aspect of this pattern."[18] In a behavior pattern, the reader need only present a part to facilitate the audience's understanding of the whole.

For example, in "real life" a man who is for the moment "proudly contemptuous" of some one or something, may express that feeling by a slight tossing of his head, a sneer, a smirk, the placing of a hand on his hip, and several other more-or-less obvious behaviors. The oral interpreter synechdochizes contemptuousness by one or two characteristics of the full pattern (simply by a slight toss of the head, for example). In this way the interpreter abstracts: from the reality of all the attitude manifestations, he selects those which he believes express the essence of the attitude within the context of the material he is reading.

The interpreter uses the self-referencing qualities of language and literature in his performance. He may use language self-referentially by altering denotative meaning by tonal connotation. He uses literature self-referentially through his unique self's identifying with the persona he portrays dramatically. Lastly, the oral interpretation performance provides a third self-reference, existence in an art experience and as a part of the audience at the same time.

The interpretation performance is a mixture of art and reality. We see the reader clearly in a large room without costuming or props. He could easily be mistaken for one of the audience. Yet he asks us to see him simultaneously as the someone else in the literature. Some art critics have commented on the fact that each form of art has a device for preventing the audience from mistaking it for reality: the painting has its frame; the theatre, its proscenium arch. Then perhaps the interpreter insofar as he looks like a member of the audience becomes his own "frame," reminding his audience by his physical actuality that he is creating a fictive experience.

The interpreter allows us to observe the persona through his own

identification with it. We are then able to identify with the interpreter through his performance. We become most aware of the necessity of this complementary identification when we witness an incongruous juxtaposition of fiction and reality. For example, a twenty-year-old girl may read King Lear, but not with explicit realism. When she attempts to forget her own age, experience, sex, and physical attributes by lowering her voice and bending over in a stoop, we find it ludicrous. She, as an interpreter, should never forget what she is in reality because that is a part of her interpretive performance. Yet it is possible to read powerfully the essence of Lear by reading to emphasize the universal human tragedy he represents. The girl then may strengthen her interpretation by her separate existence as a human being like Lear and also like her audience. The audience members experience the inside of Lear (art) and the outside of the interpreter (reality) and simultaneously realize the differences and similarities between the interpreter and Lear. The interpretation performance metaphorizes by constantly cross-referencing similarities and differences of the interpreter and the persona.

By insisting on the separation in the audience's mind of persona and interpreter, the interpretation performance provides another dimension to the empathy usually found in character identification. To explain this development, we will use Katz's stages of empathy.[19] In literature, the self-reference process incorporates three stages of empathy: the absorption of self in the literary character, introjecting the literary character into the self, and a reverberation between the two. Oral interpretation includes these three but, because of its direct and continuous reference to the reality surrounding the audience, detachment or distancing allows the audience a degree of intellectual perspective on the ertire

interpretive experience. The audience is not totally drawn into the experiences in the literature to the extent that they forget how these experiences relate to their own. This detachment stage, which balances illusion and reality, is only possible because of the interpreter's dual role as actor/reader.

Several implications may be drawn from Bronowski's concept of self-reference for interpretation performance. First, the actor-reader dichotomy is dependent on the unique self-reference of the interpreter: the actor creates illusion; the interpreter modifies illusion with reality. Insofar as the interpreter adjusts to the physical environment of his performance, maintains his own personality, and acknowledges the presence of an audience, he is a reader of the text. Insofar as he draws away from these into the character and scene of the literature, he is an actor. Because he is both simultaneously, they refer to each other during performance. Second, the added dimension of empathy, namely intellectural detachment, is made possible by this self-reference. It seems then that this may be the possible resolution of the dilemma. The interpreter presents neither solely a fictive persona as an actor nor his individual commentary; but rather he does both at the same time and for the excellent reason that this self-referencing provides the audience with a rare intellectual and emotional literary experience.

These implications may stimulate investigation of other related research questions:

1. In what way does the interpreter extract the essence of a persona for his aural and visual presentation if not realistically?
2. Does this quality of detachment make the interpretive performance less aesthetic and more editorial?
3. Do other performing arts have a self-referent quality if the audience is aware not only of the dramatic situation, but also

the personality of the famous "star" who is acting, dancing, or playing?

4. Is the interpreter equally himself and the persona or more one than the other in drama? In prose? In lyric poetry?

5. What does self-reference imply for the reading styles of narrative and dialogue within one text?

FOOTNOTES

[1]Maud May Babcock, "Interpretative Presentation Versus Impersonative Presentation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 2 (January 1916), pp. 18-25.

[2]Charlotte I. Lee, Oral Interpretation, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 260.

[3]Ibid., p. 262.

[4]Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, Second Edition (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1972), p. 65.

[5]Lee, p. 262.

[6]Bacon, p. 65.

[7]Ibid.

[8]J. Bronowski, The Identity of Man (Garden City, New York: The Natural History Press, 1965).

[9]J. Bronowski, "The Logic of the Mind," The American Scholar, 35 (Spring 1966).

[10]Ibid., p. 237.

[11]Ibid., p. 238.

[12]Ibid., p. 239.

[13]This anonymous epigram was contributed by Professor Hugo Reichard, Purdue University, 1967.

[14]The Identify of Man, p. 75.

[15]Ibid., p. 74.

[16]Don Geiger, "Oral Interpretation as an Art of Communication," Oral Interpretation and Literary Study (South San Francisco, California: Pieter Van Vloten, 1958), p. 35.

[17]Walter J. Ong, "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives," Approaches to the Poem, ed. John Oliver Perry (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 251.

[18]Don Geiger, "The Expression of the Oral Interpreter," Oral Interpretation and Literary Study (South San Francisco, California: Pieter Van Vloten, 1958), p. 64.

[19]Robert L. Katz, Empathy: Its Nature and Uses (London: Collier Macmillan Limited, 1963), pp. 41-46.